



Conflict Management Strategy for Health Care Organizations

A White Paper by
Andy Kaufman

President, Institute for Leadership Excellence & Development Inc.

Conflict. We know it's inevitable, even in the best run organizations.

Yet it exacts a heavy toll when not managed well. Research finds that managers spend 18% to 26% of their time dealing with conflicts, depending on their level in the organization¹. Think of that in terms of cost: it could be literally millions of dollars in a medium to large-size hospital. A recent study calculates the cost of conflict to U.S. businesses at \$359 billion annually.²

But more than time and cost, conflict can negatively impact decision-making, retention, and even the safety and quality of healthcare. When conflict involves disagreements between people bringing diverse perspectives on an issue, important information can be withheld or ignored, impacting the quality of decisions. Mishandled conflicts can lead to resentment and hostility that can drive absenteeism and employee retention. In the healthcare setting, poorly managed conflict can even impact the quality and safety of care.

The Joint Commission Standard LD.2.40 is designed to help hospitals manage conflict between leadership groups to protect the quality and safety of care. This white paper shares a roadmap for how you can significantly improve your organization's ability to manage conflict.

Develop Conflict Literacy

"When you hear the term *conflict* what comes to mind?" We ask that question to teams all over the world. The responses typically come back along the lines of "fighting", "arguments", "stress", and even "Avoid!"



To manage conflict effectively across an organization, it helps to have a common vocabulary that provides a better understanding of what conflict is and how to manage it.

For example, Kenneth W. Thomas defines conflict as *the condition in which people's concerns—the things they care about—appear to be incompatible*³. There are some interesting implications in this definition. People in conflict truly care about their positions. These positions appear to be incompatible but are not necessarily completely so. By helping your organization develop a fuller understanding of conflict, you can begin reframing it from something hostile to an opportunity to seek understanding and potentially a better solution.

Conflict is the condition in which people's concerns—the things they care about—appear to be incompatible.

Kenneth W. Thomas

We provide on-site workshops and e-learning to help develop conflict literacy. In these workshops we introduce participants to the five conflict-handling modes: *Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding, and Accommodating*.



In conflict, the *Competing* style tends to focus on satisfying their own concerns, even at the cost of the other person's concerns. It's *win-lose*.

Collaborating is more of a truly *win-win*, seeking to find a solution that fully meets all parties' needs. Though this sounds ideal, complete collaboration is not always feasible.

The *Avoiding* style seeks to postpone or avoid the conflict completely. It's not *lose-lose* as much as, "Conflict? What conflict?"

Accommodating is the opposite of *Competing*. It's *lose-win*: your concerns are sacrificed for what the other person is seeking.

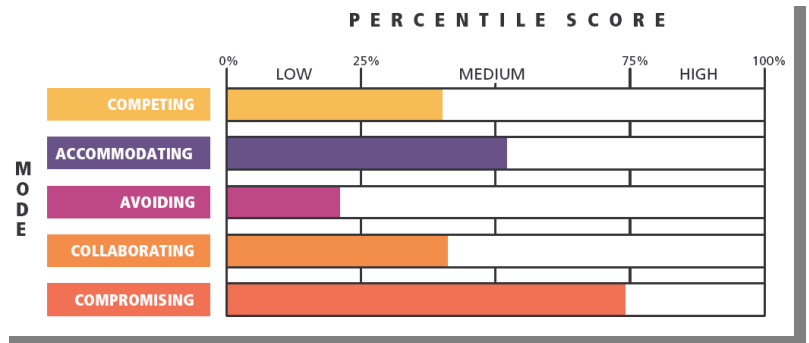
Compromising tries to find middle ground. It sounds like *win-win* but could be better considered *partly win-partly win*.

Depending on the situation, any of these styles can be valid. The first step is to familiarize people with the concepts and terms.

Identify Conflict Styles

Once your organization understands the different styles it's time to get personal. An important question is "What are my natural tendencies when it comes to conflict?" Equally valuable is, "What are our natural tendencies as a team or organization?"

We use the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) to measure individual conflict-handling styles. The TKI is the world's best-selling instrument for understanding how different conflict-handling styles affect personal and group dynamics and for learning how to select



the most appropriate style for a given situation. The TKI assessment is a key tool for managers, team leaders, and human resource experts to safely open a productive dialogue about conflict. For more than 30 years the TKI has been used successfully help individuals in a variety of settings understand how different conflict styles affect personal and group dynamics.

By consolidating the TKI results for a team (or department or an entire hospital) certain tendencies can be identified that can help you better understand how conflict is currently handled as well as opportunities to improve effectiveness.

A CEO related how he thought his leadership team too often "caved in" (or over-utilized the *Accommodating* style) when there was conflict. We had the CEO and his leadership team take the TKI. By looking at their individual results, each leader learned valuable insights into their unique tendencies. However, an unexpected result was that the CEO, in fact, led the group in *Accommodating*! His leadership team, over time, was learning from him how to deal with conflict. This awareness led to a fruitful discussion on how to respond to the insights from the instrument.

Build Conflict Management Skills

Once people understand their natural conflict management tendencies, they can begin to learn how to better navigate through conflict utilizing the style that best fits the situation.

In our workshops and e-learning we help people learn how to select the best conflict mode. In addition we provide a framework for walking through a conflict situation. Referred to as "DISARM", this process provides a structure to help someone prepare and walkthrough a conflict situation with greater confidence and skill.

Participants learn about the difference between *positions* and *interests* and the value of meeting with involved parties as early as possible. They learn the importance of concisely and clearly identifying the conflict and gathering information with as little bias as possible. Finally, participants have the opportunity to practice on real world conflict situations to keep the material as practical as possible.

Whether conducted onsite, via e-learning, or a combination of both, turning knowledge about conflict into actual skills is a critical requirement for your LD.2.40 initiative.

Approve an Ongoing Process

The Joint Commission requires your senior managers and leaders of the organized medical staff to work with a governing body to develop an ongoing process for managing conflict among leadership groups.

This process must be approved by the governing body and implemented when conflict arises, particularly when patient safety or quality of care is at risk.

By involving your top leaders across the organization in this process, you are more likely to get the support required to make conflict management a core competency.

Next Steps

We invite you to contact us to customize a program to meet your needs. We can help you develop conflict literacy, identify conflict styles, and build conflict management skills in a consistent, repeatable manner across your organization.

As the Joint Commission Standard directs, conflict management skills can be acquired through various means, including experience, education, and training. You may offer training sessions to key individuals or bring in experts to teach conflict management skills.

Our on-site workshops can be customized and delivered to groups of 15-25 in a workshop. It can also be delivered to larger groups as a keynote at a company meeting or leadership retreat.



A site license of our e-learning workshop allows an unlimited number of people in your organization to access the same learning as our on-site workshops, *all for less than the price of one on-site workshop. With today's economy taking a toll on budgets, this can be a great option.*

The program is well done, from the graphics to the content. The five conflict handling modes are utilized, and explained, well in the program. I like the tests because they can't be completed unless one really participates in the program.

Hospital Chief Learning Officer

We offer the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument in an electronic or paper-based form. We offer some of the lowest rates available for the TKI. Visit www.healthcare-conflict-management.com/tki-assessments.html for details.

Contact us by e-mail at solutions@healthcare-conflict-management.com or toll-free: 866.884.5323

¹ Thomas, K. W., & Schmidt, W. H. (1976). A survey of managerial interests with respect to conflict. *Academy of Management Review*, 19(2), 315–318.

² "Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness it to Thrive", CPP Global Human Capital Report, July 2008.

³ From Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument by K. W. Thomas and R. H. Kilmann, 1974, 2000. Mountain View, CA: Xicom, Incorporated, subsidiary of CPP, Inc. Copyright 1974, 2000 by CPP, Inc. Used with permission.